

Sara J. MILSTEIN. *Tracking the Master Scribe. Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xviii + 244 p. ISBN 9780190205395.

This is a well-written, exciting and programmatic book that makes a great read, and that can be situated “within the current wave of scholarship that calls for increased attention to scribal method and hard evidence in the context of literary-historical and interpretive pursuits” (6). The ‘hard evidence’ that Milstein refers to consists of texts that are available in different versions. The particular ‘scribal method’ she pays attention to is the widely evidenced phenomenon that ancient scribes “added material to the front and back ends of their works in the course of transmission” (6). While historical-critical scholars of the Hebrew Bible in the past did propose that specific literary sections came into existence through the addition of material before and after literary kernels, Milstein presents the first full-length discussion of this phenomenon, and focuses in particular on large scale shifts in the development of works.

The introductory chapter Spotlight on Method: (Revision through) Introduction (pp. 1-41) gives a helpful overview of recent Assyriological studies on textual change (Worthington; Hobson; Delnero) and the recent developments in Biblical studies relating to the study of scribal methods and hard evidence (e.g., Carr and Pakkala). This introduction advocates a new historical-literary approach which is controlled by the analysis of how scribes actually worked, and proposes programmatically that one can reconstruct the processes of textual transmission without aiming for complete reconstruction (28). This chapter offers a good introduction into the newer developments of literary-historical scholarship.

The second chapter discusses well-known “Evident” Cases of Revision through Introduction (pp. 42-75) in Mesopotamian literature (in particular the Sumerian King List and the Epic of Etana), and in Hebrew/Biblical literature (in particular The Qumran Community Rule and the Books of Esther). Based on those four cases, all supported by the hard evidence of different versions, and a range of other examples which are referenced briefly, Milstein offers a series of conclusions and different possibilities pertaining to the addition of new introductions to a work.

The bulk of the book consists of four case studies, each distinctive, which reflect some of those features, namely the introductions in Adapa (ch. 3), the Gilgamesh epic (ch. 4), Judges 6-9 (ch. 5), and those in Judges 19-21, 1 Sam 1, and 1 Sam 11 (in ch. 6). A main difference between those case studies is that the two Mesopotamian case studies actually attest to different versions, enabling one to materially recognize the affixing of introductions, and to analyze the effect of the new introduction upon the interpretation of the earlier work. In the case of Judges 6-9 and 19-21, however, the phenomenon of revision through introduction is hypothesized on the basis of inconsistencies in the final form of those texts. The exciting analyses of the possible growth of those sections might seem to some to be entirely hypothetical, as much of the historical-critical analyses of the late 19th and 20th century. Milstein’s work, however, differs from those bygone attempts exactly by the ‘control’ provided by the cases where we do have hard evidence, and by the care not to reconstruct to every detail.

I leave an assessment of Milstein’s invigorating proposals with regard to the Judges (and Samuel) materials to others, but fully underscore and embrace the programmatic character of

her approach, namely to build up a literary-historical methodology on the analysis of the actual textual and material evidence which show how such master scribes really worked. Strongly recommended as a stimulating example of the new wave of textual-historical scholarship.

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